DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 392 367 HE 028 967

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TITLE Organizational Structure and Activities of Centers and Institutes Which Study Higher and Postsecondary Education.
PUB DATE [95]
NOTE 19p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrative Organization; Educational Research; Financial Support; Governance; Higher Education; *Institutes (Training Programs); Institutional Characteristics; Institutional Mission; Institutional Role; Organizational Objectives; *Postsecondary Education as a Field of Study; *Research and Development Centers

ABSTRACT

This 1993 investigation examined how centers and institutes established to study higher education and enhance student learning function, their organizational structure, and their activities. Using an open-ended questionnaire, the heads or directors of 25 such centers were asked to provide responses to questions on the organizational status and role of the center, primary research activities, and the identification of other center activities. After completion of a second mailing, a total of 17 responses (68 percent) were received. Findings indicated: (1) that most centers served a number of "masters," either departments, colleges, or advisory boards; (2) that most were focused on institutional or local community needs; (3) that almost all placed strong emphasis on student issues, such as enhancing classroom experience; (4) that most showed a growing responsiveness to community colleges; (5) that virtually all centers reported dissatisfaction with their current financial situation due to cutbacks or elimination of funding so that they must depend on their ability to attract external funding, or cease operation; and (6) that research components of centers appeared inconsistent with national concerns such as distance learning, technology, quality and accountability, and international issues. Includes a list of the 25 centers contacted and their addresses. (Contains 10 references.) (JB)

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Organizational Structure and Activities of Centers and Institutes Which Study Higher and Postsecondary Education

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HE 027 967

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"Organizational Structure and Activities of Centers and Institutes Which Study Higher and Postsecondary Education"

Abstract

Higher education graduate programs have played roles in both preparing professionals to work in higher education, and in the study of the operations, trends, and issues in the higher education community. Many higher education graduate programs established centers and institutes to study higher education and to promote student learning. The current investigation was designed to examine how these centers and institutes function, their organizational structure, and activities. Using an open-ended questionnaire, participants reported a general lack of investment by higher education faculty to examine themselves and their roles. Additionally, many centers and institutes reported mixed levels of autonomy, a primarily domestic research agenda, and low levels of funding.

Higher education graduate programs have often attempted to fulfill the dualistic role of training professionals while simultaneously studying the environment and factors impacting higher education and those who receive services. This concept was first brought to public attention in Dressel and Mayhew's (1974) Higher Education as a Field of Study, and has continued to receive scholarly and practitioner oriented attention. Studies examining various components of higher education programs have included program faculty (Newell & Kuh, 1989), program quality (Keim, 1983), student expectations (Grace & Fife, 1986) and career paths (Townsend & Mason, 1990), and even basic reading materials (Miller & Nelson, 1994).

As a by-product of the dual nature of higher education programs, many faculty and administrators developed institutes or centers to aid in research projects or student instruction, or providing some combination of these. While many centers and institutes were originally established in the early- or middle-1970s, there has been a trend to reduce programs and costs, and the result has been the elimination of several centers.

As higher education faces the dramatic changes of the decade of the 1990s, there has been a resurgence of interest in centers and institutes which study higher education. From this interest, the current study was conducted to profile the organizational structure and activities of centers and institutes which were affiliated with graduate programs which offered study in higher education.

Background of the Study

Higher education centers have not historically been the main or primary focus of published research. Graduate programs in higher education, with which many centers and institutes have been closely allied, have, however, been examined from many perspectives. Much of this research has been sporadic, and has not consistently followed any direct line of inquire (Miller, 1993). Additionally, many of these investigations have indicated that a comprehensive listing of graduate programs in higher education is difficult to obtain, with the possible exception of programs in student affairs, as noted by Keim and Graham (1987).

Davis, Faith, and Murrell (1991) reported that while the Directory of the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) listed 93 doctoral programs, the actual number was probably somewhat lower as some programs had recently been discontinued. Crosson and Nelson (1986) reported similar problems of identification, and estimated that there were between 80 and 90 higher education doctoral programs.

Within these higher education graduate study programs, much of the research which is undertaken is focused on the future of higher education. The study of the administration and operation of institutions, particularly in student affairs, has been a central theme for higher education programs. Additionally, more recent trends such as institutional advancement, planning, and enrollment management have been at the core of research activities. Primarily developed to aid in research, centers and

institutes seemed to flourish in the 1970's as higher education grew dramatically in its role and function. Similarly, these centers and institutes served as a vehicle for enhancing student learning by providing a framework for offering internships, assistantships, and practica and field experiences for individuals preparing to enter higher education as professionals.

Despite the use of centers and institutes to focus research and teaching activities, the budget restraints and financial crises of the 1980's often forced several to close. This relatively short life-span is perhaps one of the reasons centers and institutes have gone largely ignored by researchers in higher education. With substantial changes in higher education currently taking place, and the increasing complexity of issue and demands for efficiency and effectiveness, a mechanism is needed to assist higher education in its transformation, and to train administrators to work in these institutions. Therefore, a unit or structure such as a center or institute needs to re-emerge as a driving force.

Methods

To obtain a listing of higher education centers and institutes, the 1990 ASHE Directory, which provided a list of "individual programs and centers" (p. i) was utilized. The Directory may have been somewhat selective in its inclusion partially due to matters of definition, and problems associated with the identification of centers. A total of 14 centers or

institutes were identified in the Directory, and a comprehensive review of the literature and professional discussions increased the potential listing to 25 centers or institutes (see Table 1).

The heads or directors of all centers were contacted and asked to provide responses to three open-ended questions. The questions included these topics: the organizational status and role of the center, primary research activities, and the identification of other center activities. Data were collected in the 1993 academic year.

Results

In addition to the original mailing, two follow-up mailings were done requesting the participation of the center or institute director. After the completion of the second mailing, a total of 17 responses (68%) had been received from the population of 25 centers, and these responses were subsequently used in the data tabulation. These data were reviewed independently by all authors in the hope of achieving accurate and consistent data interpretation.

Organizational Status and Role of Centers

Responses to the general question indicated that the centers and institutes operated under a wide variety of managerial and administrative structures. Implied in many responses were the themes of management, funding, autonomy, and linkages with other organizations and agencies both on and off campus.

The principal determinants of each center's management status were the unique needs and arrangements of each institution. The most common arrangement seemed to be that centers were located within the university's college or school of education, although the nature of this status varied dramatically by institution. To illustrate this point, six respondents provided especially clear examples. The Institute of Higher Education at the University of Florida, for instance, reported an administrative location in the College of Education, but was also directly responsive to the Provost and the Vice President for Sponsored Research. The Institute Director and Assistant Director were faculty members in the Department of Educational Administration, and others who worked on Institute projects came from other faculties in the university, or were temporarily included in the Department as faculty, staff, or consultants.

Alternatively, the Director of the Center for Educational Leadership at the University of Toledo reported that it was primarily a departmental center in the Department of Educational Leadership, and functioned as a line item in the Department's budget. The Center at the University of Virginia was similarly located in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies. The Virginia Center functioned, however, as the academic unit for those students taking doctoral studies in higher education, and was designed as an "instructional, research, and service unit" in the School of Education. Conversely, the Director of the Center for the Study of Higher

Education at the University of Arizona reported that while his Center was formally linked to the Department of Educational Administration, it was autonomous and "essentially independent." The Director of the Memphis State University Center for the Study of Higher Education also reported that her center was a "free-standing unit" in the College of Education.

While the Memphis State Center was not a credit-producing academic unit, it was the administrative unit for the interdepartmental doctoral program in the area of higher education. Center personnel were responsible for admitting and advising students, the administration of comprehensive examinations, and doctoral dissertation advising. The Center also held management responsibilities similar to an academic department (e.g., budgeting, professional development, staff evaluation, etc.).

The Center for the Study of Higher Education at Pennsylvania State University reported high levels of autonomy, and indicated that the Center was designed as "an intercollege research program reporting directly to the Office of the Vice President for Research." The Center maintained its own faculty and budget, and was physically housed in the same facility as the University's Higher Education Program, where Center faculty taught and advised graduate students. This Center also reported that it made use of a national advisory committee which consisted of "nationally recognized higher education professionals." The committee met on

an annual basis to review the activities of the Center and to provide advice concerning future Center activities and directions.

Funding, Governance, and Staffing

Virtually all of the centers reported dissatisfaction with their current financial situation. Given the constraints on higher education funding, particularly from state sources, several directors reported that their institutional funding had been either completely or almost completely eliminated. The University of Maryland reported that internal financial cut-backs were the cause for its closure of the National Center for Postsecondary Governance and Finance when its federal grant expired.

The general financing pattern for higher education centers was one of increasing dependency on their ability to attract external funding, or to cease operation. Several respondents reported entire reliance on outside funding or grant sources to maintain their centers. At the University of Florida, the Institute for Studies in Higher Education had its budget cut from $56,000 to nothing during a two year period. The Institute now relies entirely on finding its own support. Similarly, the University of Arizona's Center also reported that funds had been "sharply curtailed" and that external "replacement funds" had begun to be found.

As suggested in the response to issues of funding, there was little enthusiasm about higher education center autonomy. One

director reported "the autonomy to which I refer, I must admit, is more benign neglect than real autonomy. Frankly, without funds of our own, we have no real autonomy." Another director confided that autonomy had been a "struggle." And yet another director commended that autonomy was one of the most difficult goals for any university center to achieve.

The majority of centers reported linkages with colleges of education and departments of educational administration. Few centers or institutes described coordination with external bodies, however, alliances with other academic departments were common through faculty collaboration.

There appeared to be no national forum for center directors, and no ready means of discovering the range of activities in which other centers are engaged. While several centers indicated the use of outside consultants, scholars, or visitors, few centers reported regular, formal contacts with other organizations. Only one director, for example, attempted to place his center in a global context, and despite orientation, activities were described as loosely structured and dependent upon faculty interests.

Linkages with other educational bodies, such as secondary schools and community colleges appeared sporadically among respondents. In particular, the centers at the University of Toledo, Memphis State University, and the University of Florida worked closely with local community colleges to provide staff development and management programs.

Typically, the centers were staffed by a faculty member in the higher education program. Additional staff, most of whom held a faculty appointment, were also given administrative titles within the center or institute. Arizona's center indicated four tenure-track faculty, two to three adjunct faculty, an administrative assistant, and three internal policy analysts who were funded by the provost's office. Similarly, the University of Maryland's Institute for Research in Higher and Adult Education directly employed "at its peak only four faculty." Respondents did vary, however, as Virginia's center reported the employment of 11 faculty.

Activities and Research Themes

Centers reported a wide variety of activities, ranging from staff development workshops to community college job training programs. Most centers indicated an on-going commitment to sponsoring events such as colloquia and workshops, sometimes principally for in-house audiences, but also increasingly for community colleges. Workshops for departmental chairs in particular were mentioned several times, and newsletters seemed to also be a regular feature for centers. In addition, the Center at Penn State had begun a specialists library for higher education research, and sponsored an annual lecture series which brought "scholars in higher education with broad perspectives" to campus to speak "on issues of concern and importance to higher education."

Several centers also reported involvement in projects or consultantships commissioned by other institutions, coordinating bodies, or governmental agencies. Often, these projects were reported to be research related, but at other times were concerned with program evaluation or faculty development. Again, it was reported that funding for such activities was not as easily obtained as it had been in the past.

Some of the larger centers also indicated that it was possible for students to undertake a practicum or internship through the center or institute. Other centers reported that they "brokered" internships and assistantships through the center for other units on campus. The matter seemed related largely to the organization status of the center and its level of funding.

Virtually every responding center or institute reported that research lay at the heart of their role and work. Almost every center listed at least two or three major research projects currently underway. Several of those listed included: vice presidents for academic affairs at two-year colleges, undergraduate student satisfaction, factors affecting faculty productivity, sexual harassment on campus, academic professionalization, Native American students, administrative team models in higher education, and faculty preparation.

The larger centers were primarily engaged in projects which had a national focus, while smaller centers tended to focus on more local concerns, often those of the home campus. There were also a high number of projects related to the community college

sector, yet there was almost a complete lack of comparative or international research issues identified. Insofar as centers were able to indicate likely future research, there was no suggestion that projects would differ dramatically in the future.

Discussion

As higher education institutions have begun to readdress the issue of role, mission, and accountability, the need for a mechanism to effectively study the entire spectrum of problems facing higher education has become paramount. The current investigation was designed to examine one such mechanism, the centers and institutes designed to study higher education, which were quite common to graduate programs during the 1970's. In particular, this study sought to provide a better understanding of the functions and administration of these centers and institutes.

From a methodological standpoint, the open-ended questions utilized in data collection were not conducive to generalization. Additionally, there proved to be no single structure or format for centers, as they represented a host of reporting lines and autonomy. The majority of centers did, however, seem to have a loosely structured environment in terms of non-student related activities. For the most part, matters related to student activities were strictly mandated by the degree granting component of the institution, typically a department of higher education.

As noted in the findings, most of the centers served a number of "masters," either departments or colleges or advisory boards. In general, most were focused on institutional or local community needs, and this was particularly true for smaller centers. Almost all of the c[illegible]ers and institutes also placed a strong emphasis on student issues, such as enhancing their classroom experience with practica experiences, field studies, or research opportunities. The growing responsiveness to community colleges was also found in most centers, perhaps in part because of the growing importance of this sector of higher education, and perhaps in part because of the potential to generate income.

Of all the data gathered on centers, the research component appeared inconsistent with national trends. Despite a grocery list of research projects, issues such as distance learning, technology, quality and accountability, and international issues were all but ignored. As evidence of this absence, only one center identified an international research project, and that dealt with postsecondary planning in the Bahamas. This lack of leadership in facing the issues which are confronting higher education was disturbing, especially in light of the nature of higher education programs to be agents of change.

All of these findings, especially the financial state of most centers, adds up to a not very pleasant picture for centers and institutes. This situation, however, is one in which a great deal of good can still be done, dependent upon coalition building and the linking of centers to examine broad issues from an

institutional perspective. Efforts, even cursory overviews as this, provide a preliminary step in developing collaboration among centers. Only by addressing the trends and issues of higher education as a whole will centers and institutes be allowed to once again flourish and prompt the much needed dialogue about the future of higher education. Centers can provide both a vehicle for the analysis of future alternatives for higher education and the needed discussion of the changes necessary to assist institutions to utilize technology in meeting the needs of the global society in a more efficient and effective manner.

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Table 1
Locations of Higher Education Centers and Institutes

Institution	Location
Illinois State University*	Bloomington, IL
Florida Sate University	Tallahassee, FL
Memphis State University	Memphis, TN
New York University	New York, NY
Northeastern University	Boston, MA
Pennsylvania State University	State College, PA
University of Alabama	Tuscaloosa, AL
University of Akron	Akron, OH
University of Arizona	Tucson, AZ
University of California-Berkeley	Berkeley, CA
University of California-Los Angeles	Los Angeles, CA
University of Florida	Gainesville, FL
University of Georgia	Athens, GA
University of Houston	Houston, TX
University of Illinois-Chicago	Chicago, IL
University of Indiana	Bloomington, IN
University of Maryland	College Park, MD
University of Massachusetts	Amherst, MA
University of Michigan	Ann Arbor, MI
University of Missouri-Kansas City	Kansas City, MO
University of Oklahoma	Norman, OK
University of Pennsylvania	Philadelphia, PA
University of Pittsburgh*	Pittsburgh, PA
University of Toledo	Toledo, OH
University of Virginia	Charlottesville, VA

*Center determined to be inactive.